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To the Night Wind

By Glenn Ward Dresbach

I

O I have heard you, Night Wind, when the Spring
  Was waking in a night of crowded stars,
Singing such songs as make the World's heart sing,
  And as you sang it seemed the earth's old scars
Were covered with new grasses and with dew,
  And nothing ached save with the sweet desire
Of love and growth that is forever new,
  With dreams that build the soul's white altar fire.

O Night Wind, let my heart in Springtime be
  To you as grasses growing and as blooms.
While past the crowded stars God watches me,
  O let it keep the stillness and perfumes.
And make it glad as wild seeds that break through
  The hardened mold to starlight and the dew.

II

O Night Wind, when the grain was like a sea
  Of rippled gold beneath the summer moon,
Oft I have heard you singing tenderly,
  And as you sang I heard a mother croon;
I heard the under-songs of streams that fed
  The roots of roses; and your singing told
How the wild buds burst into flowers red
  And how the grain was turned to living gold.

O Night Wind, let my heart in Summer be
  To you as grain that ripens, and as fruit
That waits a little longer on the tree
  That still has life that thrills in branch and root.
And make it fearless as all things that know
  They give but payment for their right to grow.

III

And O, Night Wind, when leaves were drifting down,
  And the great, wide-eyed moon was full of dreams,
When all the harvest fields were hushed and brown,
  And mists hung listlessly o'er meadow streams,
Oft I have heard you chanting till the night
  Was like a temple where the heart could rest,
Where all things that had sought and found the Light
  Were called again unto the Mother-breast.

O, Night Wind, let my heart in Autumn be
  To you as leaves that give their all and go,
As harvest fields where naught is left to see
  Because their grain is reaped; but let me know
Some part is fuller for the gift mine gave,
  Some soul is braver that my soul is brave.

IV

O, Night Wind, let my heart be like all things
  That mortal are, but let my soul arise
With you and go upon untiring wings
  As you go, singing, bold and free and wise,
Yet tender as you are, and full of might,
  Through changing seasons with their changeless end,
To all the hearts that listen in the night,
  To sing their dreams, to urge them, and befriend.

And sometimes let my soul be in the storm
  That scatters fears among the hearts that feed
On other hearts that through the years are warm
  With love of life—for which they oft must bleed.
But how my soul would sing when seeds broke through
  The hardened mold to starlight and the dew!

Two Poems

By Florence Kiper Frank

A WOMAN

You are all the beauty that I had meant to be.

You have said with your body what I would say with
 my singing.

You are color, form, movement — your breasts swell
 roundedly.

When you move it is as the swaying of the dancing-
 girls of the temple.

When you move, you are meaning! But I can sing
 of your beauty,

And you shall never understand yourself as I under-
 stand you.

RELIGIOUS

Why do I not go within your church of a Sunday
morning?—

Because I am too religious,

Altogether too reverent-minded,

Bearing still an inclination to believe in God.

Therefore the sight of your fat millionaires lulled
by the sermon,

Even the sight of the thin ones, makes me irritable
and vengeful;

Also the feel of the sunshine coming in through
the open windows

Converts me at once to paganism and a faith in the
divinity of trees.

Under a Roof

By Lyman Bryson

"For a change I want to sleep under a roof," said Mercer, with the petulance born of lonely riding and the flatness of the plain. "I'm tired of sleeping under that sky."

The Fort Kearney captain drew his forefinger through his brown beard and looked meditatively up into the greyish, unflecked heavens. "It's a good sky," he remarked, whimsically indifferent to Mercer's irritation.

They stood under the cottonwoods which went around the four sides of the Fort Kearney parade ground. The year was 1859. Mercer looked back toward the long line of thin willows to the north, just marking with tired green the bed of the almost dry Platte river. He looked beyond to the low north range of bare hills. Except for the cottonwoods under which he stood and the ragged river willows, there was not a tree or a bush to be seen in that direction, nothing but unmarked level prairie, uninhabited, unbroken, unrelieved, dustily grown with hardy buffalo grass. Only the wide trail of many wagon tracks, coming, side by side, south toward the fort from the river, showed that there was another world and that travellers came by. Mercer groaned. "Yes, it's a good sky," he said, "but it's dry and hot as brass and I'm tired of it."

"Sorry, sir." The captain's courtesy was quite impersonal. "I'd be glad to take you in, but my own quarters have been given over to a sick man and I couldn't put you in anywhere else. It appears to me that you'll get under no roof tonight, nor any night for a long time, unless you find a place in a ranch house."

Mercer turned his eyes impatiently from the monotony of the north distance. "What's that over there?" he asked, pointing a thin gloved hand. His eye was caught by a clump of cottonwoods which, to his surprise, broke the bare west sky line, rising on the open land, two or three miles away. Beneath them were a few desolate looking buildings. "Didn't know you had a settlement near here."

"That's Dobe Town." The captain spoke as if the name should have conveyed an unpleasant significance.

"Dobe Town?"

"Yes. I would be very happy, sir, if I could turn our artillery on that bunch of shacks and blow them into hell." There was a very earnest grimness in his courteous voice. "That place is the worst hole of downright evil between Omaha and Cherry Creek."

Mercer's homesick eye saw roofs in that miserable little settlement. Camping on the long trail had become an intolerable burden and any roof had a hospitable air. "Do they take in pilgrims there?"

"Not if the pilgrims ask our advice."

Mercer's narrow jaw was thrust forward with the

tenseness of worn nerves and annoyed fatigue. "I'm not afraid of any man, nor any —."

The captain smiled in his curly brown beard. "Of course you aren't, my friend. Please yourself about it." He moved away across the parade ground.

While Mercer stood there, irresolute for a moment, a boy of eighteen years or less walked rapidly toward him as if he had been waiting for a chance to accost him. "How d'ye do?" said the boy, touching his black slouch hat with his right forefinger. "Ain't you Mr. Mercer, the gentleman who is travelling alone with a team of horses?"

The traveller looked the boy over carefully. It was not prudent to spread the information that he was travelling alone. As he had come up the river valley he had passed no other outfits such as his. There were ox-trains and mule-team outfits, but no one else had been driving alone with a span of high bred mares and a light camp wagon. There had been envious examination of those horses by other travelers. Several Pawnee Indians, friendly to whites but of a thieving disposition, had followed him one day for miles, keeping just beyond the range of a greeting. "I don't travel alone," he said shortly, and turned away.

"Gosh, Mister," protested the boy, honestly, "I ain't no horsethief."

"What do you want, then?"

The boy was taller than Mercer, but before the slender, elegant, truculent figure of the older man he was apologetic. "Well, you see, I'm sort of

stranded. I come this far with a man who said he was going on through. When he got here he got plumb disgusted with Nebrasky — and he turned back."

"He was extremely intelligent," interrupted Mercer.

"Sure thing he was." The boy was eager to agree. "But he wouldn't let me go back with him. Now I was sort of counting on going on west with you."

"With me? Why with me?"

"Because you are travelling alone. Excuse me — they said you was alone. I thought maybe you could use a likely man to help you make camp and be sort of useful around."

"Would you go for nothing — just for transportation?"

"Sure." He smiled generously.

"My team and wagon are over there on the other side the corral." His new employer accepted him in that sentence. "We'll leave here about eight o'clock and we are going to sleep tonight in that settlement up the trail."

"Where? Dobe Town?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Oh, just as you say, Mr. Mercer. I heard the soldiers saying it was sure a danged tough place. They ought to know. They go there to get drunk."

Mercer sneered impatiently. "You needn't go unless you want to." He walked away. But he found his employe seated on the ground against the

wheel of the wagon when he returned to his outfit. The black mares, not so sleek as they had been but still handsome beasts, stood in harness. They were ready for the trail.

The boy was talkative. "Seems like a bother to hitch up just to go a couple of miles, don't it?" He was not answered but he talked on unheard, with a speculative, drawling amused air, relating to deaf ears the unlucky experience which had landed him without means of conveyance at the post, in the middle of the plains.

His employer was thinking sullenly of what he had heard about Dobe Town. It was a cluster of small stores, most of which sold something else besides whiskey, and lived upon the "pilgrim" trade. The dominating personality in the little group of merchants was Puchel, a Frenchman. Soldiers spoke in sinister, unwholesome respect of Puchel. They assured Mercer that they were not the ones to speak against him. They insisted that they were his friends. Every remark was a challenge to Mercer's stubborn determination to test the hospitality of that little row of lumber huts with the one house of sundried brick which gave it a name. That adobe house was an exotic on the Nebraska prairie. Sod huts and clay roofs, lumber shacks and log cabins — there had been a variety of buildings in the few lean settlements he had passed through since he left Omaha, but this was the first adobe brick.

Puchel, he was told, lived in the brick house and his store was across the street on the other side.

That was the place to go if supplies were wanted. He had not asked the soldiers about a lodging for the night, after what the captain had said. That project he hid beneath a peevish reticence. Nor did he discuss it now with the chattering, goodhumored boy.

Ahead of them lay the many-tracked, broad trail, where, defined only by direction on the level prairie, wandered the wagon tracks of freight and emigrant trains. They were as free to choose a path as a vessel upon the open sea. Each infrequent rain made the dusty trodden roads too muddy for convenience and many drivers turned aside from the mud to the sod. So widened the way. But these wandering faint lines across the buffalo grass converged at the clump of cottonwoods and the little group of huts which stood beneath the broken shade of their sparse varnished leaves.

On either side of the street, which was no more than the narrowed trail, stood the few stores. Ox shoes, ox yokes, a few tools, ammunitions, canned food, rough clothing, travellers' hardware — the shops all held the same materials for trade. Before each store was a pump, sunk into the sandy prairie, through which came up the wandering waters of the Platte. But these pumps gave drink to horses. Men entered the stores. In those not given over entirely to the dispensation of a virulent liquor which went by the name of whiskey, the service was by means of a barrel standing against the wall. Near it hung a tin cup. Refreshment was here.

Into Puchel's store Mercer walked as he might have entered a Philadelphia hotel seeking quarters. He shot a curious glance about the miscellany of its shelves and board counters. Two men stood half way down its length, and when his step sounded on the puncheon floor they turned toward him. The elder, a thin-faced, thin man, with a stiff white imperial and white mustache, surmounted by crooked eyes and straight white brows, spoke in slightly broken English. "Something for you, Meestaire?"

This was Puchel. The traveller knew him by the crooked lift of one brown eye, described to him by the soldiers as a squint, and by his French accent.

Mercer's own pale blue eyes, spots of pale light in his sunburnt, narrow face, looked levelly into the eyes of Puchel. They met there a guarded, humorous, non-committal defense, the look which all plainsmen wore once, learned by this Frenchman when he learned the American speech. Mercer greeted him and took a drink from the tin cup.

Monsieur Puchel thought lodging could be obtained for him. To be sure, pilgrims seldom stopped in Dobe Town over night. They pushed on toward some better camping place. As for sleeping under a roof, scarcely anybody ever sought that luxury. However, Mercer's explanation, that he was weary of sleeping in the open, seemed to be satisfactory. He could stay all night with Ol' Puchel.

"You are Puchel?"

"Yes, yes. I am Puchel. This is Ol' Puchel. This is my woman. Come with me if you please."

When they stepped out into the street, the spring wagon was where he had left it, but his boy companion had wandered down the street and was drinking from a pump. Mercer followed his guide, noticing the sharp, envious admiration which the crooked brown eyes gave the horses.

"My man will put those in the corral," Mercer said, but Puchel, staring greedily, did not answer.

At the open door of a small log house the Frenchman turned and without knocking led the way across the threshold. The room was a kitchen. An oil lamp shed a warm yellow light in one end of its darkening interior. There were no more than one or two pieces of furniture, and the rough wooden floor was bare. Puchel bade his guest sit upon a stool and went on into the next room.

He re-entered after a moment, followed by a stooped, grey little woman whose face was scarcely visible until she came within the range of the glow of the lamp. She was perhaps the same age as Puchel, but she gave the impression of being aged irretrievably, as if some blighting experience had driven all the bitterness that comes with years hard upon her before her time. She seemed somehow heavily touched with evil, and the peering look she bent upon her guest was neither hospitable nor kind.

"He can stay here," she murmured, in a voice that gave in spite of quietness a surprising sense of vitality. "There is not much room but there is enough."

Puchel nodded and took a step toward the door.

It had grown quite dark now in the little street. The doorway was as black as a window upon an unlighted wilderness.

"I am not alone, you know," Mercer reminded him. "I have with me the boy who looks after my horses. I should like to have him occupy the same room with me."

Puchel had perhaps been so much engrossed in the handsome horses that he had not heard the reference Mercer made to a companion when they were in the street. At least he was taken much by surprise. He seemed to have been presuming a number of things which the fact that Mercer was accompanied made impossible.

"You are not alone?" There was resentment in his tone. It might have been supposed from his raised white eyebrows that the stranger had been trying to pass himself off as a person very different from what he really was. Mercer looked back at him coolly, repelling the curiosity in the brown eyes, and made no answer.

"You did not have a man with you when you crossed the river this morning," continued Puchel, and the traveller wondered how he had discovered that. The straight white brows were drawn down over the half closed eyes in a challenge. "You did not ask lodging for two, Meestaire."

The old woman had said nothing. She stood silent, not attempting to direct the disposition of the accommodations of her house.

"I can't see that it makes much difference," Mer-

cer replied curtly. "He can sleep with me — if you have a bed." He turned to the old woman. "May we stay?"

She held to her silence, waiting for the Frenchman's orders. "Let them stay," said Puchel, smiling suddenly a cold, polite little smile. After he had gone through the doorway he turned in the darkness and added, "If your man is with your horses I'll tell him where the corral is and how to get here."

"Madame Puchel —" Mercer tried to see her shadowed face.

"I am not French," she broke in. "Do not call me Madame."

"I beg your pardon. Your husband did not tell me that you were crowded for room. I hope we will not be an inconvenience."

"My husband?" There was a queer intonation in her voice as if over an unfamiliar term. "Oh, yes. Puchel." She accepted that appellation of husband for the Frenchman, but her manner left Mercer uncertain. However, he could not ask her why she had so spoken.

Courtesy was not forgotten even in his mood of annoyance which had been growing upon him for days, and which would be his disposition until he could be freed from the irksomeness of travel. In spite of that he was a man whose face and manner expressed consideration and breeding. He had something more than the courtesy of the plainsmen, which was always a striking attribute of those characters; he had behind irritation and elegant, trucu-

lent reserve, an air of fine understanding. It may have been something in his personality, or it may have been some crisis of weariness in her own life that made the old woman say, "Puchel is my husband — yes, but no one but a stranger ever calls him that. He calls me Ol' Puchel. So do his friends and all the others."

"I shall call you Mrs. Puchel." He had an impulse of pity for her, but before it had more than stirred within him she turned so that the light fell full upon her face. His first impression of the evil that was expressed in her countenance was renewed with a shock. He could not be sure whether it was the effect of loathsome deeds in which she had taken part, or the effect of some dire suffering in which she had looked too long upon loathsome things. The long thin nose stood out boldly as if the rest of her face had retired from it, weary perhaps of its indomitable supremacy. The eyes were black with dull sunken fires. The mouth, thin, pursed slightly, was little more than a wrinkle, deeper than the others which folded her pale skin. Her hair, still dark, lay flat and sparse on her head, and when she spoke her teeth showed old, and black, and broken. Her deprecatory smile affected him with repulsion, but the stir of pity survived faintly. He was sorry for her as one is sorry for degradation and the misery of the damned.

Ol' Puchel seemed not to notice his recoil. She continued to smile and sat down on another of the low stools. "You've had supper?" she asked in a high, sharp tone.

In fact her guest was hungry, but he did not ask for food. He studied her face, trying to think of some inquiry that would start her talking about herself. She began without urging, her stooped figure in the faded blue calico dress and black shiny apron leaning forward on the stool.

"Puchel was proud of me once. Hard to believe that now." She grinned, conscious of ugliness and decay. "When we first came west, not so many years ago, he called me his old woman. Now it is only Old Puchel. Well, that's my name." She spoke jerkily. "He was proud of me until I was taken. Oh, he fought — he fought desperately to get me back. But it was too long. After five years. He couldn't be proud of what was left."

Mercer's face expressed his complete bewilderment before he spoke. "I do not understand."

"You do not? You don't know why he calls me Ol' Puchel and lives in that other house — not with me?" She showed plainly that she had supposed him not completely ignorant of her history.

He shook his head.

"Then I am an old fool to have spoken."

"But you can tell me the story now."

"I have never told any man, not even him. I will not."

"Why should misfortune — if you were taken from him — ?"

She stood up from her stool in a sudden rage, almost diabolic. Her long thin face shook and was drawn into a hideous scowl. Her shoulders were

drawn high and her hands clenched. "Ah-h-h, you are a fool, a tenderfoot! I was taken by the Sioux. I was dragged away, at night. I was carried over there, over the hills." She waved a palsied hand toward the south, toward the divide beyond which lay the valley of the Republican and the buffalo country. "When I came back —" she paused. Her tempest was spent and she muttered with an unholy disgust, "He could not touch me."

Mercer's appalled silence was all the answer he made.

She chuckled suddenly, completely recovered. "I take care of pilgrims for him. What he says to do, I do." She looked at the pilgrim before her with such a direct intensity and such a malevolent grin that he shrank back. "I was his wife, young, eh? Five years in the hills with the Sioux — ugh! I am only Ol' Puchel. But I can still do his work. He is not sorry that I came back. Others may be, but not Puchel."

Mercer looked at her with fascinated, curious wonder. It was evil that had come upon her, then, he thought, and not her own deeds that had given her that sinister degradation of face and expression. But it was the touch of evil, nevertheless, and terribly repellant.

A step upon the floor informed him that his companion had come. "Corral's just a few rods down the trail," said the boy, after he had given the unspeakable old woman a greeting but not the slightest scrutiny. "Right handy. Gee, I'm hungry."

Mercer waved a hand. "Feed him," he commanded, and Ol' Puchel hurried to her stove. The boy ate the hominy and corn bread set before him with an appetite which the appearance of his cook could not daunt. He drank his coffee with a headlong thirst. The older man tried to bring himself to the point of joining in the meal, but the crowding ravenousness of the boy was an added disgust.

The trail and rough manners were bringing Mercer the suffering of a nervous reaction. He had known camp and field for years almost as well as he had known Philadelphia drawing rooms. He was a victim of periodic revulsions of taste which sometimes drove him from one extreme to another. He had set out across the plains this time, all alone, disdaining companionship until caprice had led him into accepting the boy at the post. The plains had seemed when he started a welcome relief from the stiffness of the city. He had been feeling an intolerable contempt for dressed-up mankind. The remedy had been this inland voyage, a drive from Davenport to Cherry Creek on business known only to himself. But monotony had soon dulled his mood, and the weeks of solitary unrelieved loneliness had changed his desires. Now the hulking hunger of this lad, the harshness of the fare, the rough interior of the cabin room, and the hideous good humor of his hostess,—these things were a heavy nausea to him. Mercer was not a plainsman; he had not the moral control over sensitive feelings which made heroic conquerors of those men. His western excursions were visits to

a foreign country. That was why the spectacle of the old woman fascinated him unreasonably and he could not forget her in simple hunger.

He could divine only a little of the jeering malice which filled her feebleness and made it strength. He guessed, only, at the degradation of those five years as the despised prisoner in the camps of savages. He could feel that evil had become a part of her, however, and that she served Puchel as she boasted of doing, with ruthless faithfulness. She clung to the crooked eyed Frenchman although she had been made alien to his affections. Her guest could not keep his eyes from her dimly seen figure.

After the meal she led them into the inner room. There was a door, a rude contrivance of boards, between this room and the kitchen, supplying a refinement of privacy unusual in log cabins. In the inner room stood one stool and a huge bed. The bed posts had been ax hewn from cottonwood logs and had warped strangely, so that the blue, blanket covered pile of feather mattresses which were heaped up above the post tops appeared to be only precariously supported. There was no place to put the lamp, and the woman had evidently no intention of leaving it in the room.

"This is where you can sleep," she told them, shading the lamp light from her face with one fleshless hand. Its rays penetrated the screen of her crooked fingers and streaked her face with weird lights. Mercer stared at her; the boy examined the huge bed.

"I'll sleep on the floor," the boy announced. "That big thing looks too hot for me."

"There are blankets enough. Spread them on the floor if you want to," replied the old woman and walked out. The lamp, held before her, cast her shadow backward into the room, long, contorted, inhuman. The door swung shut and cut it off suddenly, leaving the room dark.

The man climbed upon the bed and the boy stretched out upon the comfortless floor, cheerfully unconcerned with incongruous hardships. He remarked, sleepily, "Funny place, this is. That Frenchman was terrible interested in our horses. Asked me a lot about you, too. Good thing that corral is close by. Them horses couldn't whinny without me hearing them."

The other suddenly bethought himself of a precaution. "Have you a pistol?"

"Gosh, no. Wished I had."

"I'll get you one in the morning before we start out."

As he was falling asleep, Mercer thought of asking the boy his name, a formality which had slipped his attention, but his drowsiness overcame him and the question was not asked.

Several times Mercer stirred during the warm night. Half-waking, he was conscious of the bare room which he could not see but imagined vividly. He thought each time of the old woman on the other side of the door and shuddered. In the last of these moments of wakeful uneasiness he spoke in a whis-

per. "Are you awake?" There was no answer. He sat upright on his mountainous, soft bed. "Oh, say!" There was no sound, even of a sleeper's breathing, from the boy's dark corner. Slipping down he walked with shoeless feet across the floor, although he knew before he had gone three steps that there was no one else in the room. The boy's shoes were gone; he discovered that by feeling about in the darkness.

As Mercer stood there he heard two sounds. First came a horse's whinny from the corral; one of his own horses might be speaking a quite obscure and useless message. After that came a sudden low murmur of voices on the other side of the clumsy door, in the kitchen of the cabin. They ceased, and while the guest stood there listening, the moccasined feet of the hostess came softly across the floor of the other room. He did not move. The door was stealthily opened. There she stood, the lamp light shaded from her face with one bony hand, peering at the empty bed.

Until that moment Mercer had not associated with any thought of real danger to himself the evil reputation of the settlement, nor the crooked envy of Puchel's gaze at the horses, nor the malicious attentions of the old woman. But there was something distinctly purposeful in the steady peering of his silent visitor. He stood still and she advanced. Over one post of the bed, where he could have reached them from his sleeping posture, hung his cartridge belt and two heavy pistols. She seemed to

be looking at them rather than at the bed. The lamp was extinguished with one quick movement.

Mercer let out inadvertently a little gasp of surprise. He heard her pause a moment and then her feet went on, swiftly, across the floor. He flung himself panther-like toward the bed. He was too late. In the darkness he ran his fingers up and down the bed post where his weapons had hung. They were gone.

"You will please give me my pistols at once." He spoke in a tone of cool fury, incensed at such a trick — speaking into the utterly silent darkness of the strange room. He groped about until he found the wall and followed it until he came to the door. It was fastened. Without any moment of consideration he plunged against it. The boards of the upper half gave way and fell clattering on the other side. He found himself looking over the lower part of the door which barred his progress like a waist high gate. Ol' Puchel sat at the table beside her lamp and she looked up with an innocent surprise which made him pause for a moment, so unexpected was her startled expression.

"Heavens!" she gasped. "What's happened?"

"You know very well what has happened. Where is my boy? What did you do with my pistols when you took them a moment ago?"

"You are dreaming, young man. Go back to your bed before you break more of the house down on a poor old woman."

Mercer was near speechless with rage, helpless be-

cause he did not know what attack was being made upon him, nor how it was to be met. "Where is my boy?" he asked, again.

"Why don't you call him?" The old woman had settled back with a diabolic mockery of quietness.

"I don't know his name," Mercer confessed with hopeless candor.

She chuckled. "You see, young man. I told you you were asleep."

For an answer he vaulted through the hole in the door, coming down on all fours within six feet of her. Even then she did not move but continued to chuckle as if his convulsive leap had been a tumbler's feat meant to please her. From the direction of the corral he heard a shout. It sounded like a cry for help and he thought it was followed by a muffled attempt to call his name.

"Where are my pistols?" He advanced toward her, realizing that he could not under any provocation touch her, but trying to intimidate her by a resolute threat.

The chuckle spread over her wrinkled colorless face, grotesque in the yellow light. Mercer took up the lamp and looked about the room, glancing swiftly into all the empty corners and upon all the shelves. There were few places where his brace of pistols could lie without being seen, but they were not found. His anxiety to get out of the place to the corral, where his precious horses were, grew upon him like a fever. No pistols. He stubbed his shoeless foot upon a stool and for a moment was checked by that

ridiculous pain. He heard again the sound of his name called, unmistakable this time and in a rising crescendo of alarm. There was a shot, then two more, almost simultaneous. Mercer set the lamp down on the table beside the unspeakable old woman. He looked at her with baffled fear and disgust. Her chuckle had died and she returned his gaze with a glance almost mournful. With suicidal finality he ran, shoeless, hatless, without weapons, out the door into the street.

The heavy darkness of early morning had already given way to a faint awakening in the east, a pale shivery failure at light. He could see the stores across the street, dark and closed, with the wooden pump standing like a dwarf guard before each door. He cursed tersely to himself as he thought that he should have known where the corral was before he went to bed. It had been a part of his fascinated interest in the old woman that he had dismissed his priceless outfit without prudence to the care of the boy. A few rods to the right, up the trail, he saw what appeared to be a wall, such a wall of sod as would make the corral in this prairie place. Padding softly in the dust he ran toward it.

On either side the corral gate stood a man. He ran between them and stopped, a distracted spectre in his shirt sleeves. "What's the trouble?" he asked, breathless. He was trusting to his luck, the only weapon he had, to get him through and protect if possible his friend. He was sure that it was the boy who was involved in that ominous noise which

had sounded like the calling of his name, and then murderous, silencing, pistol shots.

One of the men, who carried a revolver drawn in his left hand, put his right hand upon the newcomer's elbow. "And who, my friend, are you?"

"My man came out to look after our horses," Mercer replied, hastily. "I thought I heard him call." He started to go on into the enclosure but the man held to his arm. Mercer threw him off with an angry twist and felt the end of a pistol screwed quickly against his side.

"Not so fast, my friend. There's business going on in that corral."

As he spoke the other guard at the gate spoke in a low whisper. "Here they come," and four or five figures appeared in the dim nearness. Gradually it was getting lighter, and he recognized Puchel in the group. Between the two men at the gate Mercer stood quietly, assuming no injury until Puchel was close and then asking with admirable casualness, "Have you seen my young man in there, Monsieur Puchel? He left me to look after the horses."

Puchel came so close that his white brows and imperial were clearly marked upon his dark face. "What do you know of that young man, Meestaire? What was his name?"

"I don't know."

"That is unfortunate," said Puchel portentously, "for he will never be able to tell you."

Mercer felt an incredulous sick dismay. "What does that mean, sir?"

"He has gone the way of horsethieves," replied Puchel, thrusting his face closer, watching the effect of his words. "And now, Meestaire Mercer, I have some questions to ask of you."

"Horsethieves?" The prisoner gasped, but not because he entertained the accusation against the nameless boy. "He was no horsethief." He felt the pistol screwed more tightly into his ribs, urging him to move. In his bewilderment, he wondered where the old woman could be; she must have been, in her malice, the contriver of this impudent farce. He was surprised that she was not there aiding in it. He was being walked down the street toward the house, however, toward her house. They walked in an irregular little group with their prisoner, choked and silent, in the middle. Puchel turned in toward the cabin. The prisoner hung back.

"Couldn't we discuss this matter out here? It will soon be daylight. Not under that roof again, if you please."

Puchel snarled now in open hostility. "Be silent." He thrust his face close again, distorted and glaring. He was more ruthless and brazen as they came closer to that house. They stepped across the threshold.

"We've done for one thief. We've got the other." Puchel spoke as if making a public proclamation to the assembled citizens, his four or five retainers.

The old woman sat at the table in the grotesque waverings of the lamp light, just where Mercer had left her.

Puchel addressed his words to her and pointed a thick strong hand at the prisoner. "Is this the man who spent the night here?"

She nodded, and it appeared in the emphasis of that nod that she had suggested the question as well as giving it an answer.

"Did he come with a tall, lean boy, driving a team of black horses?"

Before she could nod again Mercer broke in. "What sort of nonsense are you carrying on here, Puchel? That boy would not steal my horses!"

Puchel whirled. "*Your* horses! And where, Meestaire Pilgrim, did *you* get them?"

Mercer answered in his exasperation, "That is none of your damn' business."

The whole situation, the menacing group of silent men around him, the fearful uncertainty of what had happened to his companion, the helpfully evil presence of the old woman in the corner — all these were unreal and impossible. He had slept beneath a roof, he had given up the monotonous freedom of the plain for a whim, and he had run his head into a lair of enemies.

"Those horses belong to Jim Betens," said Puchel. "Don't they, Jim?" One of the men nodded. "What about it, gentlemen?" Puchel turned to the others. "Whose horses are they — these horses the stranger claims are his?"

"Sure, they're Jim Betens's horses, all right," said one, and the others nodded.

The old woman in the corner got up and came for-

ward with hobbling haste. She plucked at Puchel's sleeve and whispered to him. He nodded. She pointed silently to a coiled rope in the corner of the room. Puchel followed her gesture and squinted for a moment at the rope. "Do you know what we do with horsethieves?" he flung at the prisoner.

Mercer's eyes had also followed the crooked finger of the woman. He knew what was done to horsethieves. But he was still incredulous. When he felt his hands looped up behind him, while the pistol was still ground painfully into his flesh to keep him from resistance, pallor slowly displaced the flush on his cheeks.

"If you intend to murder me for my horses," he said steadily, "for God's sake be quick about it."

He knew now what he had got himself into. They wanted his horses. Hanging him would silence him more effectively than any other sort of murderous expedient and would provide them with an explanation against enquiry. He was a horsethief, they could say. Justice was swift in Dobe Town. As he stood there, bound, he realized also that he had brought into their hands, and for his own whim, the nameless boy. It should be said to his honor that as he waited within three moments of a thief's death, Mercer felt, stronger than anything else, a bitter remorse for having been the cause of the boy's obscure slaying.

The rope was picked up and the Frenchman dropped the noose loosely over the prisoner's shoulders. Mercer gathered his strength and walked

steadily toward the door. Just across the threshold, in the faint grey light, the lynching party paused. Down the trail, coming from the fort, was a little group of rapidly moving horsemen. The Fort Kearney captain and five troopers flung themselves down before Puchel's door. The shots in the corral had been heard at the post, and the officer had remembered the slender headstrong traveller who said he would sleep that night in Dobe Town.

Puchel's moment of discomfiture was brief. As the captain strode toward him with a fierce question he seemed all eager welcome. "Do you know this man, then, Captain? How lucky for us. You came in time to save us from a terrible mistake."

"Mistake?" Mercer still bound, blazed at him. "What of the boy you murdered?"

Puchel's indignant stare was perfect. "This *boy* was caught in the corral, Captain, stealing horses. He was shot as you would expect. We are not slow with justice in Dobe Town."

"What did you know of the boy?" the soldier asked Mercer, his face taking on the same look of helpless anger that was in the face of the prisoner.

"Nothing. Not even his name. But I know he was not a horsethief." As Mercer spoke he saw behind Puchel the jeering grin on the face of the old woman.

The captain shrugged his shoulders and walked from the cabin. The "justice" of the plains was ruthless and sudden, but it was the only law in that land. He could not question a whole settlement on the word of a lone traveller.

Mercer and he went to look at the bent up body of the boy, lying in the corral in the thin daylight. In helpless pity the captain turned upon the traveller. "And what right have you to protest anyway? You led the boy into this murderous hole, so you could sleep under a roof. Under a roof! And he died here in the corner, shot in the back, and you had a rope around your neck." He was a hard man and grim. "Where are you going to sleep tonight?" he asked.

"I'll not sleep tonight," said Mercer.

Beyond the Last Trench

By John H. Wallace

Here is "the peace that passeth understanding,"
The rest that each has waited through the years;
No more grim captains of the strife commanding
Worn hosts to charge the battlements of tears;
No more the heartache of a red endeavor,
Into the storm of bitter battle drawn;
Deep falls the night where winds come whispering, "Never,
Never another dawn."

Never another dawn to eyes so weary,—
The gray light stealing on the sleeper's rest,—
The tramp of feet — the call of bugle dreary —
To end the dream or stir the dreamer's breast;
Never another dawn with strife's to-morrow —
The day is done — the last lone call awaits —
Here at the road's end of all strife and sorrow —
Safe through the twilight gates.